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## Head of the herd

**Sheep and goat producers in Kentucky have a new man leading the flock**

By Robin Roenker

SPECIAL TO THE HERALD-LEADER

When Ray Bowman first started raising goats on his Franklin County farm about 10 years ago, he heard a lot of stifled laughter from other livestock producers.

Fast forward a few years, and no one's laughing at Kentucky's booming goat industry. At roughly 70,000, the Bluegrass state's goat herd is the fifth-largest in the United States.

"Now, people ask me what I do and then say, 'Oh, that's so interesting,'" said Bowman, a retired communications professional with more than 30 years' experience in state and federal government. "More and more people are realizing that goats are not just a hobby for folks, that they are a way that people are actually making a living on a family farm."

More recently, in an effort to diversify, Bowman and his wife, Stephenia, have added a flock of 20 sheep to their farm's herd of 70 goats.

While the state's sheep flock is smaller, with roughly 35,000 head, Bowman thinks sheep and goats are poised to play a major role in the state's agricultural future.

"These are very practical livestock, and they do have a very strong position in Kentucky's agricultural landscape," Bowman said.

It's a message Bowman hopes to spread in his new role as executive director of the recently established Kentucky Sheep and Goat Development Office.

"If you could sit down and say, 'What's my dream job? What do I want to do?' I would have created this position. It's what I've been doing as a volunteer for some time," said Bowman, who previously served as president and board member of the Kentucky Goat Producers Association. "It's what I really enjoy doing: promoting the industry and working with producers."

### Shepherding an industry

The new role is a sort of third career for Bowman, who logged 30 years with Kentucky state government in the Public Information and Emergency Management offices, before putting in two more with the Federal Emergency Management Administration, or FEMA.

It was during his tenure with FEMA, which took him on the road weeks at a time working on hurricanes and other natural disasters, that Bowman felt his farm calling him home.

"I was working six or seven days a week, 12 to 14 hours a day, and Stephenia was e-mailing me pictures of the new baby goats being born. And I thought, 'I don't really want to be doing this. I want to be at least where I can go out and see them every day and keep in touch with my farm better.'"

With his new position, Bowman will not only be able to keep in touch with his farm, but those of other goat and sheep producers throughout the state. Bowman plans to travel the state meeting with other producers at least two or three days a week. His office's headquarters will remain in Frankfort, allowing him to represent the interests of the sheep and goat industries to pertinent government agencies, he said.

"We will try to find out what the producers need by visiting with them, and then we'll convey their needs to the folks that can help them accomplish it," Bowman said.

Funded through a grant from the Kentucky Agriculture Development Board, the new Kentucky Sheep and Goat Development Office will be overseen by the Kentucky Sheep and Wool Producers Association and the Kentucky Goat Producers Association boards of directors.

Bowman's appointment will "bring unity to both organizations and help open up new markets" to the state's sheep and goat producers, said Richard VanSickle, president of the Kentucky Sheep and Wool Producers Association.

Bowman acknowledges that his task is a large one: representing all elements of the goat and sheep industries -- a diverse array of breeds representing meat, dairy and wool production. But he feels the two species complement one another and represent a viable option for small farmers looking for a way to profit from their land in the wake of declining tobacco sales.

"It's a way for small property owners to realize some profit and live the life that they want to live," Bowman said. "I think sheep and goats have a big role to play in keeping Kentucky's agricultural heritage going."

#### **More demand for goat meat**

There is room for expansion in sheep and goat markets, Bowman says. The U.S. goat industry in particular took off in the 1990s thanks to growing demand for goat meat in expanding ethnic populations in the United States for whom goat is a staple. Currently only 50 percent of the goat meat consumed in the United States is produced domestically.

Bowman hopes that Kentucky's other livestock producers will see the success that goat producers are having and want to gravitate toward the industry. In particular, he notes the merits of "companion grazing," in which cattle and either sheep or goats are maintained on the same land, improving the pastures for both species.

"Ray knows the challenges facing these industries, and his work to promote them in our state will really be an asset to goat and sheep producers," said Shawn Harper, president of the Kentucky Goat Producers Association.

"For the first time, Kentucky's sheep and goat farmers will have a unified voice for their industry," said Todd Harp, a project analyst with the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy. "The combination of agriculture segments will strengthen profitability for our farmers in the commonwealth."

While his new position means postponing retirement yet again and limiting time for his other hobbies -- including acting and playing old-time music on fiddle and banjo -- Bowman wouldn't have it any other way.

"This is the most fun I could ever have on the job," he said. "It's as close to perfect as any job could be."

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